The Writing Moment, or, A Little Writing Theory Can Make All the Difference

Sylvia Read

Let's say I want my students to do some persuasive writing in preparation for the upcoming state-wide direct writing assessment, which I know will provide my students with a persuasive essay prompt. I decide to have them write a letter to the custodian complaining about how dirty the cafeteria is and persuading him that something needs to be done about it. This will be perfect, I think, because all of my students have experience with this and all of them can see the benefits of having a cleaner cafeteria.

When I ask my students to do this, many of the letters are in the following vein:

Dear Mr. Wallentine,

The cafeteria is so gross! Our class eats lunch next to last every day and when we get to the cafeteria, there is ketchup and napkins and all kinds of garbage on the floor. I think you need to do a better job of keeping the lunchroom clean so that we can enjoy our lunch instead of sitting around in the middle of everybody's garbage. Thank you for your time and attention to this matter.

Sincerely,
Colin

School Writing and Kairos

I have created a "kairos" for my students that just doesn't work. According to rhetorical theory, kairos is the occasion of writing, the historical context in which the writing occurs, the conventions of writing expected in the context, and the manner of delivery that the audience expects. Every piece of writing has a theoretically perfect moment in which it could exist—the Christmas letter that arrives mid-December from someone you've been hoping to hear from, the thank-you note that arrives two weeks after the wedding, the articulate and polite customer complaint letter that arrives just when a company is on a customer satisfaction campaign.

In school we often end up asking our students to write pieces that have no right moment, either because the writing lacks a true audience (beyond the teacher as evaluator) or because the student has no interest in the topic that has been assigned. Kairos is the essence of authenticity. The best writing is writing for which the writer has an authentic audience and a real purpose. This kind of writing isn't easy to come by in school. Because we need to develop students' writing fluency and facility, we need to have them writing every day, with or without real audiences and purposes. But we can do more, I think, to help students find real audiences and purposes, even if they end up mostly writing for each other to entertain or inform. And we need to help them understand audience, which affects every aspect of writing.

Writing as a Social Process

Almost all "real-world" writing (as well as other forms of communication, including talk) happens within a specific context that includes a reason for the writing and a real or imagined audience. Writing, like speaking, is a social act that differs according to the situation in which it occurs. The email you write to a colleague complaining about the school calendar for next year is probably going to be very different from the letter you write to the superintendent or the call you make to a school board member concerning the school calendar. Your position within the hierarchy of the school system changes the way you speak or write. Your relationship with the person to whom you are writing also changes the way you speak or write—or it should.

Writing is also a recursive process that moves from, for example, generating an idea, to drafting, to revision, back to drafting, touching on idea generation again, editing a bit, then quitting when you run out of time! In other words, it is not a linear process that moves smoothly from idea to written product. Writers need to be able to go back and forth, thinking and drafting, revising, drafting a little more, etc. But while revising, the writer may realize that the audience for the writing may not have enough background knowledge about the topic and decide that a new section needs to be added on near the beginning of the writing. So while in the process of revising, the concern for audience can cause a writer to change word choice, adjust voice, draft new text, even spell correctly. None of this would be necessary if writing were not a *social* process.

Writers need to be able to go back and forth, thinking and drafting, revising, drafting a little more, etc.

McComiskey theorizes writing as a social process with three layers: the textual layer, the rhetorical layer, and the discursive layer. According to McComiskey, the textual layer includes the format, style, and genre of a written text. In this case, we have the "friendly letter" format often taught in elementary school, which by its very nature assumes a friendly relationship between the students and the custodian. There is a mixture of both formal register, which sounds like it might be something a teacher would suggest that all the students include (Thank you for your time and attention to this matter.) and informal, which sounds more "kidly" (The cafeteria is so gross!). Finally, in terms of the textual layer, the letter Colin has written also looks fine in terms of spelling, punctuation, and grammar.

McComiskey's rhetorical layer refers to the role the writer takes in relation to the audience, the writer's attitude toward the audience, the writer's purpose, and the desired action the writer would like the audience to take. On the one hand, the student refers to the custodian as "Mr. Wallentine," not as "Scott" or To whom it may concern. This shows respect, but also indicates some personal knowledge of the audience. "I think you need to do a better job of keeping the lunchroom clean" shows that the student believes that it is solely the job of the custodian to keep the lunchroom clean and to say "you should" implies an order that the custodian is expected to obey. The writer's purpose is clearly to get the custodian to do all the work of keeping the cafeteria clean; there is no acknowledgment of the students' responsibility for making messes or cleaning up after themselves.

The discursive layer, as theorized by McComiskey, refers to the institutional and social context in which the writing happened. Who is the writer and who is the audience and what is their relationship? In this case, the relationship is that of a student writing to an employee of the school that he may or may not know very well, but an adult he certainly sees everyday in the school doing various work. The child is taking an authoritative tone with someone who is older and has more authority. Socially, in many cultures, children do not scold adults. The child's letter assumes he has the status to give orders to the custodian; the custodian will likely be offended by the tone of the letter and disregard it, which means that the writer's purpose will not be achieved. Nothing will be done about the current level of cafeteria messiness.

The Writing Moment

We need to help our students understand the rhetorical situation in which any piece of writing happens, which involves what is known as the rhetorical triangle. A friendlier term is "The Writing Moment" (or even "the write/right moment").

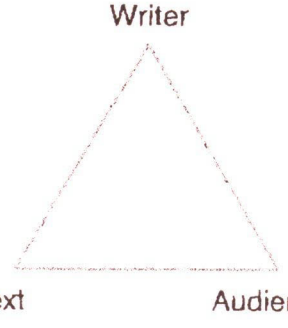
Using "the writing moment" triangle as a way to think through any writing assignment, students can be taught to ask themselves some essential questions as they write.

In terms of the writer/audience side of the triangle, we need to help students ask these kinds of questions: Who am I writing to and what is my relationship to that person? What does that person know about me? (Note: Whether teachers like it or not, in the writing situation of EVERYTHING students write for a grade, the teacher is the only audience, unless the teacher provides or the students finds another audience for the writing such as peers or others outside the classroom.) As teachers, we need to find ways for our students to write to real audiences either within the classroom or outside of it. Even when preparing students for writing assessments, our assignments should provide an audience or ask students to determine an audience for themselves. Having some measure of choice about who they are writing to can help raise students' feelings of motivation and engagement.

In terms of the audience/text side of the triangle, we need to teach students to ask these kinds of questions: How is my audience going to react to this text? If I use sloppy handwriting and don't edit for spelling or punctuation, how will my audience react? Even though we teach writing as a process, the social nature of the process requires us to think about the demands of an audience for writing that they don't have to struggle to read because the student has chosen an inappropriate font or because the student hasn't used resources to correct numerous misspellings. The form that a text takes is also a choice that students can make. Even for a persuasive prompt, students might choose between an essay-style response or a letter.

In terms of the writer/text side of the triangle, we need to have students ask themselves questions like: What is the purpose for this text? What is it within the situation that causes me to write this? What has created the need to write? Too often, we ask students to write texts that don't require them to think about these things because we have already determined their purpose and to the student, the situation that has created the need for them to write is our assignment, not a genuine need. That's the problem with the "write to the custodian about the cafeteria" assignment; the students haven't had to make any decisions or choices. We tend to kill students' natural love of writing with restrictive assignments. All students, but especially ones who have language difficulties, need to feel engaged in writing. It should be enjoyable. With an overemphasis on writing what the teacher wants them to write and teaching to the test, students "fail to see the power of writing—writing as thinking, writing as communicating, writing as having fun with language. They see writing as drudgery and themselves as workers, not writers." (Routman 34)

Figure 1: The Writing Moment



In terms of having students choose topics, Katie Wood Ray says, "Before we can ever expect students to care about *how* they write, they must care about *what* they write" (101). We can allow students to have more choice, but choice within structure, by providing the genre or the form or even the topic, but leaving at least one of the decisions to the students. If I say, "Everyone will write the directions for how to make a peanut butter sandwich. Your written procedure should include a list of ingredients and at least 4 steps" I've restricted the topic so much that

All students, but especially ones who have language difficulties, need to feel engaged in writing. It should be enjoyable.

there's no choice at all. If I say, "We're going to write a how-to book to explain something to someone" I've provided choice within structure.

Analysis of the Writing Situation

"The Writing Moment" can be taught and displayed in the classroom as a device to structure students' thinking about their writing before they do any prewriting or planning. It helps to make concrete the idea that writing is a social process in which they can attend to audience in all three layers of writing: textual, rhetorical, and discursive.

In the case of the dirty cafeteria problem, when students are guided to think about their relationship with the custodian, they can attend to the discursive layer. Instead of inappropriately assuming a superior social position from which they can give orders to the custodian, they may instead ask the custodian to help them make presentations to other classes in the school on how everyone can help work together to make the cafeteria a more pleasant place for everyone and therefore actually lighten the custodian's workload. Or, they might ask for the custodian's advice about what they can do to help keep the cafeteria clean. They could ask the custodian for information about which classes or lunch hours are the best or worst. Any number of possibilities may arise when writing is guided by this theory of "The Writing Moment."

In *Writing on Demand: Best Practices and Strategies for Success*, Gere, Chistenbury, and Sassi show teachers how to help students analyze prompts rhetorically and write strategically. So when I prepare my students for the state's direct writing assessment, I can use the Writing Moment to teach students to analyze a writing prompt in terms its intended audience and purpose and this will help them do better on the assessment. Some prompts do provide choices by leaving the audience unspecified or by asking students to choose a subtopic, helping them see where the choices are and making those choices work for them (by choosing topics they care about and understanding the adult evaluator as a real audience). To prepare them for the state writing assessment, I'll ask them to choose a school situation that they believe needs improvement and think about who would be the right audience for a letter addressing the problem. We'll talk about the importance of politeness, spelling, punctuation—all the features in the textual layer of writing. We'll think about the attitude we should take as writers, given who we're writing to, and what we think they can actually do about the situation. Finally, we'll think about our relationship to the person we're writing. Is it an open letter to the students in school, with whom the students are on equal footing? Or is it a letter to an authority figure, in which case students must be aware of the power difference between them and their audience. When these issues are taken into consideration, the writing students produce can be more effective in the real sense of getting something accomplished and also in terms of scoring better on a formal writing assessment.

Works Cited

Gere, Anne Ruggles, Christenbury, Leila, & Sassi, Kelly. *Writing on Demand: Best Practices and Strategies for Success.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2005.

McComisky, Bruce. *Teaching Composition as a Social Process.* Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2000.

Routman, Regie. *Writing Essentials: Raising Expectations and Results While Simplifying Teaching.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2005.

Ray, Katie Wood. "Why Cauly Writes Well: A Close Look at What a Difference Good Teaching Can Make. *Language Arts* 82.4 (2004): 100-109.

About the Authors

Sylvia Read taught elementary and middle school for 13 years before she began teaching language arts methods to preservice and inservice teachers at Utah State University. Her research interests include young children reading and writing nonfiction texts and current writing instruction practices in grades K-8.